

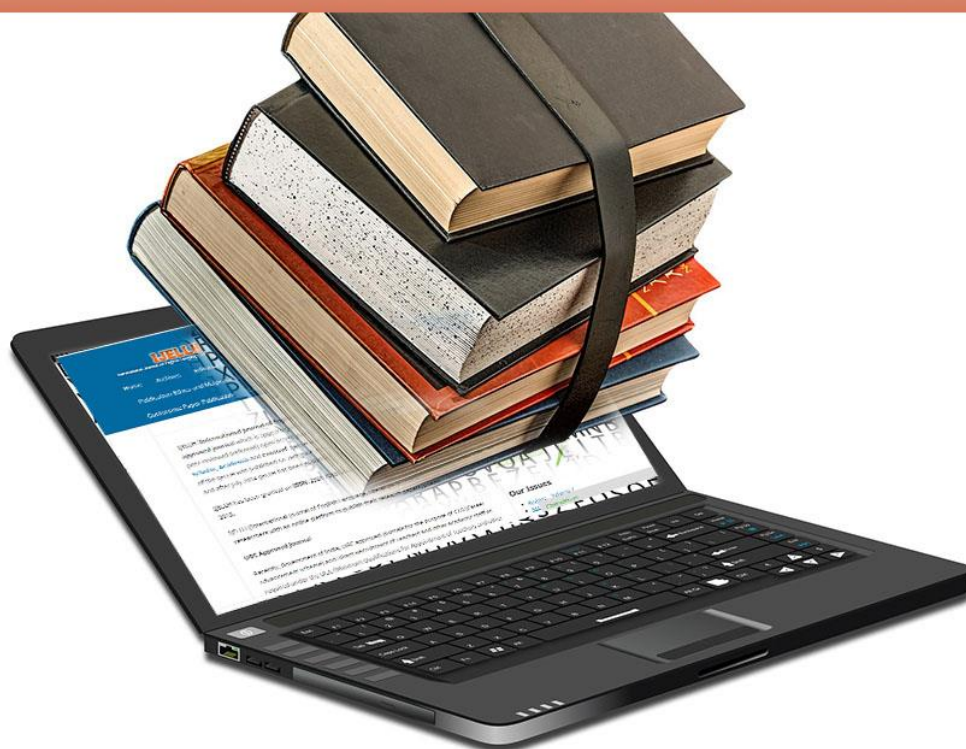
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### Escape of the caged bird: Study of Margaret Atwood's

#### *The Edible Woman*, From Feminist Perspective

This paper will make an attempt to discuss the androcentric bias practiced and promoted by the patriarchy through a study of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. This bias perpetuated and promoted by practitioners of phalocentric ideology has not yet ceased its assault on women psyche even during modern times. Specific experiences of women are being carefully documented and used every day to feed the established patriarchal institutions like family, motherhood and marriage, at the cost of essential female identity.

Keywords: phalocentric-ideology, feminist-consciousness, victimization, patriarchy, androcentric bias.

The goal of Margaret Atwood's feminist vision has always been to establish a gender-equitable 'global community' to empower women who are not in a position to assert their basic human rights. Though several books have been written on this issue, what makes *The Edible Woman* special is its journey beyond anger and bewilderment and its subversive rather than confrontational approach in solving social problems. *The Edible Woman* novel depicts the story of an economically independent woman trapped in a patriarchally constructed image gallery, trained to display her body and exhibit her talents while being bored with herself for

playing the same roles again and again, yet unable to break out of images because of social and psychological inhibitions. She follows the same path as predicted by Betty Friedan, for disillusioned women like her:

If the human organism has an innate urge to grow, to expand and become all it can be, it is not surprising that the bodies and the minds of healthy women begin to rebel as they try to adjust to a role that does not permit this growth. (Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 126).

Marian is an economically independent and intellectual researcher who takes a long time to understand her marginal status in a capitalistic, consumerist society. In spite of Atwood's comment on her heroine's stunted growth, the novel does show the transformation of a woman from a docile, non-descript state to an individualistic female.

In the initial chapters of the book, the character of Marion is juxtaposed with her female friends and colleagues whose lives she observes and weighs against her own self. She rightly sees her friend Clara as one of the casualties of female destiny. Clara becomes a veritable representation of the duplicities of female life of which every woman in the society is a victim. Clara who in the pre-marital period was "every one's idea of translucent perfume advertisement" was perforce transformed into a kind of vegetable soon after her marriage.

The central character's journey through various relationships, her sharp resistance to being consumed in social rituals makes the reader conscious of women's rights and aware of women's inner-voice. Disillusioned by the chaotic life of her friends and female acquaintances, Marion looks for an anchor who will be her 'rescuer from chaos' (89). She sees Peter in that role and they date casually, "taking each other at (their) face values" (62). Subsequently this relationship becomes a one sided one with usurping the position of the leader and Marion as the meek follower. As Marion herself admits, "as we stared at each other in that brief light, I could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (84). As the

narrative subsequently reveals, to be mirrored in Peter's eyes is to become Peter's image of her and society's image of a wife.

In the second section, as Marion becomes progressively divided in herself and objectified, she views more distorted, alienated images of herself in a series of reflecting surfaces. In one scene, "Marion gazed down at the small silvery image reflected in the bowl of the spoon: herself upside down, with a huge torso narrowing to a pin head at the handle end. She tilted the spoon and her forehead swelled, and then receded. She felt tense" (150). The image of a pin head expresses Marion's altering sense of self. Since her engagement, Marion has fallen into the habit of letting Peter choose her food for her: "Peter could make up their minds right away". Her lack of desire and inability to choose are symptomatic of her dwindling subjectivity. The plot reaches its crisis when Peter gives a final party to introduce Marion to his friends. In preparation for the party, Marion has her hair done and buys a new red dress at Peter's insistence. She is totally objectified at the hair-dresser's. Her head is "like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (214). She observes the "operation" fascinated by the draped figure imprisoned in the filigreed, gold oval of the mirror..... Her body feels "curiously paralyzed" (215).

Later, as Marion bathes, she sees her naked body reflected back in the globes, at the base of the faucets and in the spout on the bathtub, and as she moved, "all the three of the images moved also; they were not quite identical" (218). In the process, she becomes fragmented and is divided away from herself. She looks at the water and at "the body that was fitting in it, somehow no longer quite her own" (218). Her reflection in different objects like the globes, faucets and the spouts ----- amounts to specular dissolution which parallels Marion's panic over becoming her image under the "uncomprehending eyes" of Peter's friends. She rightly reflects on herself: "She was afraid of losing her shape, spreading out, not

being able to contain herself any longer, beginning to talk a lot, to tell everybody, to cry” (219).

In the third person narrative of the second section, Marion significantly loses her voice. The “I,” the subjective position of hers, much prominent in the first section is no more to be found. Now, she fears simultaneously the total loss of her shape (her subject identity) and the opposing assertion of subject (real) self that would take place if she begins to be too expressive. Her self division is imaged in two old dolls “sitting there inertly on either side of the mirror, just watching her” (219). She sharply feels that she has become divided into two selves, the image of the outer self seen by others, and the other deeper self that feels and sees inside. Thus, the two dolls, ‘by the strength of their separate visions ..... were trying to pull her apart’ (219).

This is a decisive moment, for, by acknowledging her feelings of the resultant unhappiness, she begins to struggle against the division between the self as subject and the self as object. She asserts herself by becoming aggressive and inviting her friends to the party all by herself. She negates the image she has been arrested in. When she looks at herself in Peter’s mirror, she feels fractured and alienated: “What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?” (229). Here Marion adopts what the feminists call as “female subjectivity” and subconsciously makes use of the feminine ‘imaginary’ to disrupt the masculine symbolic order. Marion’s rebellion occurs at a level below consciousness and then manifests itself in hallucinations and body language. The social ‘makes her sick’. In Marion’s view, Peter represents the law-giver and the hunter, whereas she is the escape artist identified with the spaces of wilderness. The pattern is signaled in her first attempt at flight, when she runs away from the Park Plaza Hotel. The hunting imagery is continued in the narrative, for the trap is sprung with Peter’s marriage proposal that same night. Though Marion makes every effort to adjust herself to the socially

acceptable image of adoring female partner, her eating disorder is clearly a continuation of this pattern of psychic resistance, a metaphorical expression of panic at the idea of marriage.

The design of the narrative with its radical shift from the first person narration in part - I to the third person in Part - II underlines Marion's loss of an independent sense of self; it is also part - 2 which signals the onset and crisis of her nervous-disease. As the bride to be, she has already opted out of the professional world and has nothing to do but wait passively for her wedding: "It was all being taken care of; there was nothing for her to do. She was floating, letting the current hold her up" (115). Though an apparently willing victim, Marion is troubled by her strange eating disorder and by inexplicable intimations of 'sudden formless unhappiness'.

It is the concept of freedom which Duncan represents, enhanced in his case by a Peter Pan pose of a child-like irresponsibility that creates a world of fantasy as an alternative reality for Marion.. He challenges all Marion's traditional ideas of muscularity, romantic love and parent-child relations. Caught in between this playful student world and the world of social conformity, Marion loses any sense of herself as a unified subject, beginning to hallucinate her emotional conflict in images of bodily dissolution and fragmentation. Lying in the bath on the evening of the first party which she and Peter are giving as an engaged couple, she begins to believe that her body is "coming apart layer by layer like a piece of card board in a gutter puddle" (218).

At last Marion knows what she does not want, and so she escapes from the social script to her unscripted meeting in the Laundromat with Duncan and into their brief liaison in a sleazy hotel. Where exactly Marion's undramatized clarification of mind occurs.

She could sense that she has been virtually reduced to an "edible woman." As she equates body with food, she expresses abhorrence for both and reaches a point where she cannot eat or drink anything at all:

It had finally happened at last then. Her body had cut itself off. The food circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outside (267).

Through the web of introspection and correction, established by the narrative, the central character, Marion is forced to see how the personal and political cannot be separated. Marion rejects her passivity and refuses to be a victim. The cake which she bakes and then ices in the shape of a woman, a domestic ritual, becomes her first serious attempt at liberating herself. She bakes the cake-woman in her own image, the surrogate of her own artificial self she presented at the cocktail party. Marion offers Peter the cake as a substitute for herself to demand an exploration for her disappearance from the Cocktail Party. She remarks:

You've been trying to destroy me..... You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along (271).

The narrative also goes along with and stylishly drapes itself with Marion's frame of mind. The first and last section has the first person narrative, where Marion thinks she is in control of herself. The long central section of the novel with its third person narrative, suggests alienation of self, the self desperate to get back its originality and the introspection that comes along with it.

At the end, Marion is seen as being successful in her trial through consumerism and stereotypical role play. She has managed to avoid being swallowed into the stereotyping of identity and has also managed to wade through fear of disintegration, fear of losing freedom and getting into the trap of low confidence level. Thus, it can be safely argued that the main theme of the novel concerning a woman's growth from conscious captivity to self determination has been fully explored and adequately focused in the celebrated novel, *The Edible Woman*. Though, for quite some time, Marion, the female hero of the novel plays a

series of appeasing roles to Peter and Duncan, attempting to follow the rule book of the society, she develops a new consciousness, in course of time, and meets the challenges of patriarchy.



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